



ERIC WHITACRE'S  
**VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

## CHAPTER 9: BACKGROUND COUNTERPOINT

*Using structure to build long ideas*

### Student Guide – Curiosity Edition



### Introduction

This video will help you gain insight into resolution in a musical melody. You will explore ideas that will help you understand how dissonance in music works, and how melodies can resolve to sound more stable and complete.

In Chapter 9, Eric describes how the background textures, melody and harmony can work together to create expectation for the listener. The composer can do this deliberately or intuitively, creating a sense of structure for the audience. Eric uses an example from *Let It Go* (Disney's *Frozen*), showing how the rising melody functions like a ladder in leading the listener to the climax of the refrain. Eric further uses *A Boy and a Girl* to demonstrate how dissonance, unison, return of a previous chord

structure and resolution can bring the piece to a satisfying completion.

Works referenced in this video:

- *A Boy and a Girl*: [https://youtu.be/j\\_AMI0vRqF8](https://youtu.be/j_AMI0vRqF8)

## Words and ideas to help you stay curious

Background Counterpoint  
Dissonance

## Discussion, Discovery and Insight

Why do melodies sound “finished” when they are sung all the way through, but unfinished if you only hear part of it? What is happening musically?

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What is dissonance in music? How is it created? How is it resolved?

## Using structure to build long ideas

1. Watch a video about dissonant and consonant note pairs on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/DSN9q7PKNN0>

Find a piano and play some of these intervals. Experiment with notes close together and also notes that are far apart. Be curious about all the different combinations of notes you can play and notice if you like how some sound compared to others. Try playing some dissonant note pairs followed by some consonant note pairs. Describe what you hear.

2. Sing the song *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* once all the way through to the end.

Row, row, row your boat gen - tly down the stream

mer - ri - ly life is but a dream

Notice how the song feels “finished” at the end because it returns to the first note of the melody. Try singing it again and ending on the following words: “stream” and then sing again and end on “life.” Do you feel how the music does not feel resolved when you end on these words? The Background Counterpoint leads you to expect the melody to return to the first note of the song, and unless you do it feels unresolved. Explain what you noticed in this experiment.

3. Pick another song you know and do the same experiment or play a song from a recording but stop it part of the way through. Do you feel a need to keep playing or singing? Why or why not?

## Reflection and Insights

Some people really like the sound of dissonant note pairs and dissonance in music while some other people really prefer consonance in music. Do you have a preference? Explain your thinking.

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Eric says his music uses background counterpoint to make the listener expect something to happen as he makes them wait for the resolution later in the music. How is this like a “knock-knock” joke that is missing the last line? Why is the last line important?

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Would you change this activity to better suit your learning style and interests? If so, describe how you would change it and why the adjustments would be better for you.

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